
Adolescence

IN THE attic bedroom of a large house at twilight two youngsters were trying to make up their minds about a masquerade party. Out of the stairway rose an agreeable odor of bath-towels and tobacco and face-powder, reminding the younger boy of his friend's brothers and fashionable mother, whom he admired but who often embarrassed him. He came from the country, and was sensuous and timid.

Carl, who was at home there, was the youngest of the four sons of one of three brothers who owned the flour-mill and several stores and a number of houses in the town. Philip had only his father and mother, and they were poor. They were respectively fifteen and thirteen years old.

Both were excited by the illicit cigarette

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which Carl was holding outside the dormer window. Past his friend's face, whose cynical expression was meant to reveal and in fact greatly exaggerated the effect of the smoke, Philip gazed down into the quiet though populous twilight, leaf-green and pink. The small town rose from the river-bed on a number of overlapping hills; heaped with branches and evening silhouettes, the light color of the buildings died down.

It was from the bulky yellow house under the elms that they had received an invitation to a fancy-dress party. A girl named Rita who went to school with them lived there; she was going to be fifteen years old. They could not make up their minds what disguises to adopt. Philip's imagination ran to lace curtains and borrowed jewelry, but it was Carl who said: "I'll tell you what. You dress up as a woman. I'll get my brother's glee club suit and wear a mustache. We're supposed to wear masks, anyway, and they won't know you and I'll say you're my cousin from

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Milwaukee. You'll make quite a pretty girl. Just for the fun of it. See what it's like."

The next afternoon they asked his cousins Lucy and Lois in the house next door to help them. These two lovely sisters lived with their aged stepmother and a maiden aunt. Men of their age at once unmarried and worth marrying almost never appeared on the scene of the small town; they were clairvoyant and knew what to expect; so in spite of their fresh bodies and liquid eyes they already had the serene manners of sisters of charity. They were working at a frock for someone else; eyelet embroidery and ribbons and batiste lay in disorder on the polished table.

As Carl explained what they wanted he leaned against the mantelpiece sturdily, in imitation of his elder brothers giving orders to indulgent women. "You'll find him a dress, won't you? You have a lot of old stuff in the cherry cupboard."

The young women were charmed by the

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plan. Though Philip wanted to keep even his unspoken requests within modest bounds, he could not keep his poor farmer-boy's gaze from the rich work-table: the blueprint patterns, the bolt of white cloth like a flattened pilaster, the chiselled pleats, the squares cut out—transparent marble of some fresh and incomplete and ethereal architecture into which a chilly bare body could slip as into a dwelling . . .

He came there again two days later to be tormented by one of the worst forms of fatigue, that of erect immobility touched by many nervous hands, pinched and patient, measured, turned about, discussed, labored over. They stood him on a stool by way of a pedestal. The sharp mouths of two pairs of scissors played about him, as well as a quiverful of pins both black and nickel-plated, often piercing to the skin. He was as happy and nervous as a young martyr.

The excitement of the sisters increased as they worked. Out of some bright old rags,

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pins, coral beads, and a boy—a farm boy at that—they were creating a woman's charm. It might have been a symbolical doll that they were dressing, to attract, by some rule of magic, out of the sluggish village to themselves, a multiple and passionate attention: rude young beaux dangerously troubled in the dim bowling alley, gray-haired lawyers and doctors stealing across the lawn with gifts, perfect husbands chosen finally after the most luxurious hesitations, coming there by appointment to carry them off . . . Their rather young faces of spinsters by accident grew still younger, the pure mouths and the pinched nostrils animated by laughter, imagination, sighs.

Disturbed by this hilarity in the decorous house, their old maiden aunt came to the head of the stairs and called down, "What is the matter?"

Even Carl, comparatively useless and at ease like a proprietor, regarded his cousins with a new interest and wondered at the in-

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difference of his brothers who were old enough to fall in love with them. When they were silent and busy their mouths remained slightly open, as if the invisible forms of the tones of their voices stayed on their lips. Because of them he began to feel the approach of a certain excitement in the night before him: a tumult of masked girls, lawns resilient under fleeing and pursuing feet, games which would be only a pretext for taking almost painful kisses and for laughing at them once taken—the approach of a sweet disorder in which he was very likely to forget his less and less recognizable friend.

The work was done. The sisters and Carl led the bedizened youngster into another room to a tall mirror. He wore an old-rose satin dancing frock, and long kid gloves, and on his head a black velvet picture hat out of which there pressed against the nape of his neck and his temples one of the blond wigs which the maiden aunt had worn before she had felt obliged to change to gray, unpleas-

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antly soft and audible, sweet with cologne-water. The full skirt had been tucked up behind so that it resembled the tumbled plumage of some lean, pink swan; and out of the square bodice rose his unfamiliar throat powdered and wound with coral.

"I declare, he is prettier than any girl in the village," Lucy cried.

But during the vigorous remodelling which the dress had received at the sisters' hands, the enervate satin had lost the last of its freshness; the worn ruffles and the pulled seams held together with a bedraggled tenacity; the fairy-tale pink was veined with mauve. Philip's extreme youth of a boy made a woman's maturity; and in the mirror his face had the frightened expression of a woman who feels that she is too gaudily, too youthfully dressed for her age.

Over his puckered sleeves the sisters, radiant and amused, were looking; and between their faces in the mirror Carl's face, which astonished him. How could Carl's appear-

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ance be changed by his metamorphosis—or was he merely seeing him with the eyes of the part he was dressed to play? Smaller than before, hardy and provocative, masculine to an enigmatic degree, smiling a humorless, drowsy smile. . . . The disguised boy met the other's glance, and thinking himself the cause of the equivocal expression, blushed.

Lois and Lucy said wistfully, "Have a good time," and said good-bye.

Together the boys crossed the adjoining lawns toward Carl's home. Philip was anxious on all occasions; in this preposterous costume, if he went into the house, he was certain to be teased unmercifully by Carl's brother; so he resigned himself to going without any supper.

There was a great maple tree on the lawn, inside which, on the lower limbs, the brothers had built a platform. Carl threw his arms around his friend's rustling knees and lifted him as high as he could. Philip caught a

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branch and carefully pulled himself up into the hiding-place.

"If you were a girl you'd gather your skirts together," Carl said. Then he hurried indoors to dine and put on his evening clothes and false mustache.

The sun had set; there would be no moon that night, so it must have been the earth which filled the sky with overtones of foliage and with the pearls of its pale buildings and pale fields. Inside the tree everything was dim and still. The platform on which Philip sat was enclosed by the light-colored, slim, wayward pillars of the branches.

He could smell the food being served inside the house; that was the first penalty of his adventure; he began to feel that it would not be the last. Ants went up and down the branches of the tree; he kept watch that none should get into his flounces. This led him to try to feel his boy's body inside them; he shook himself from head to toe, and decided that wearing women's clothes was like being

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tucked into a luxurious, portable bed. A whalebone in the old corset hurt him and had to be pushed back into place.

He listened to bicycles going down the streets and the discords of the different kinds of bells all over the town. Then he heard something else, this time on the lawn below, and hunted for it through the foliage. It was Carl's eldest brother, admirable, somber, and hurried. Philip shrank out of sight.

He was too young to find anything worth thinking about under such abnormal circumstances; so he let his imagination drift heedlessly, forgetful both of the nonexistent cousin from Milwaukee whom he was supposed to represent and the gallant widow, desperately eager to please, in weakened frills, whom in fact he did resemble.

Carl came back and climbed up in the tree until it should be time to go to the party. He brought the hungry masquerader some sandwiches and a bottle of root-beer. He lit a match, for it was almost dark, a flickering

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light among the dark, flickering leaves; and each adding to the somewhat exalted notion he had of his own appearance the comical image of the other, they laughed a little. Then they sat quietly and talked.

In spite of the difference in their ages they had entered high school together the September before, Philip coming from the farm to do so. The boys Carl had grown up with had been greatly inclined to bully the new, somewhat effeminate, rustic boy; Carl had defended him. In return, by the usual frauds, Philip had lightened for him the burdens of getting an education. On this basis they had become inseparable companions.

Philip's gratitude for being championed was flattering. In a childish way he was eccentric, which contrasted well with his friend's ideal banality, and his unpopularity satisfied in his friend rudiments of jealousy. He lacked common sense and offered instead the poetry of being surprised and being ex-

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cited in all his five senses by everything and easily hurt. On the whole, Carl enjoyed in him qualities that he would later enjoy in women.

Outside the tree the swallows wheeled up and down, chattering, in front of the evening star.

The girl to whose fifteenth birthday party they were going might not have invited the new boy from the country, had she not had a weakness for Carl ever since an intimate summer afternoon in a forest when they were children. She wished to flatter him by acknowledging his right to be followed wherever he went by his small protégé. Up in the tree Carl told Philip about that afternoon.

Philip, on the other hand, would not have had the courage to go, but for Carl's insistence and the promise of protection which it implied. The latter, a little boastful about his knowledge of the world, replied to every expression of curiosity on his friend's part by a recommendation of actual experience.

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Philip had often asked what happened at parties in the village.

Giving anxious attention to his false mustache, Carl smoked another forbidden cigarette.

For several years Philip had had a constant sense of growing up; it was less a sense than a sensation, as if he could actually feel cells expanding, new nerves winding like tendrils of a vine about certain muscles, bones hardening. Good-bye childhood; and his imagination, genuinely terror-stricken, crying to maturity—coming, coming, coming! Himself as a grown man looked forward to, cherished with vain anxiety, wondered about, feared and forecast in innumerable juvenile ways . . . Thus it was as a sort of Narcissus that he had been ready to bend selfishly, attentively, toward the mirror of the life of a somewhat older boy such as his friend. Desire for himself, his prospective self, was a large part of his affection.

His friend's house poured out upon the

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grass a brilliant light, but it was almost silent. Only the nurse, hopelessly in love, was singing Carl's little sister to sleep with a lullaby in which there were panting tones that Philip did not understand.

He was miserably innocent, or believed himself to be, imagining, as adolescents do, that there is more to know than there is. Up on the platform in the maple tree, in the attitude of Narcissus over the pool of darkness and grass, almost flat on his stomach in spite of his finery, he asked Carl questions about girls, hoping for answers about men—that is, about himself. Carl replied in a shrouded, muttering voice, taking advantage of his own excitement, dealing roughly with his own modesty. The questions and the answers did not quite match; one imagined that he was preparing for life, the other was getting ready to have a good time at the party . . .

Then, here and there in the town, the hour of the party struck, and they went. It was

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not far. Rita's house reached through the trees to meet them with its arms of light lying loose and open on the grass, its cries of rough amusement made by many young guests. They put on their two small black masks.

A dozen or more dressed-up youngsters had arrived before them, as they had hoped. Carl got through the false introduction well enough, made very polite by the danger of laughing. Philip slipped into a chair which stood by itself in one corner.

In the rather rich rooms, untidy with imitation flowers and twisted streamers, red with paper lamp-shades, there were tramps who had tin boxes of hay-leaves for tobacco, Indian chiefs thrust full of rooster feathers, a soldier in the uniform of no particular country, two girls in wall-paper, a Fairy Soap girl carrying a bunch of millinery violets, a pallid dark-haired Irish girl as an Oriental dancer. These disguises were all the prettier for being hasty and imperfect,

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but there would be little left of them by midnight.

Philip should have received the prize for the finest costume, if there had been one, and did receive a great deal of sidelong scrutiny. Then the games began, which he was not asked to join, and with the games the rude flirtations.

A lamp shone in his eyes, but he preferred not to move. He was too young ever to have been so lonesome before. He could not make up his mind whether the other guests had recognized him. They had not done so in the first place, while he was being introduced; that much was certain. Later, to denounce him as an imposter, they would have had to confess their original gullibility. And the revelation of his sex and identity might have made him one of them; cunningly hostile, perhaps they realized this and preferred to let him sit there—ignorant of their opinion, that is, half-ignorant of his own identity—an equivocal wallflower.

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Whenever two or three of them withdrew to the adjoining rooms, he imagined that the hilarity he heard concerned him; they giggled as if it were their common secret who he was—not his own. Rita, their hostess, who knew, spoke to him now and then but scarcely tried to draw him out of his corner.

Carl left him to his own resources. He was having a good time and was so excited that he did not look happy. Sometimes he gazed across the room with the strange smile which Philip remembered, which, perhaps, he had provoked, which now testified to pleasure that he certainly was not going to share.

The eagerness and the provoking mockery of the group of masked girls was concentrated on Carl. They too glanced repeatedly at the unhappy figure in the corner; and whoever they thought it was, their gaze expressed the hatred which immature girls feel for an older woman, less lovely, less ignorant, more sumptuously dressed. Defiantly, they

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grew less and less reserved. Carl profited by this rivalry with a symbol.

Having with the aid of his cousins made a girl out of his country friend, he seemed to have lost his awe of girls, perhaps even his respect for them. Rough and dreamy at once, he teased and touched them all; his impertinence seemed involuntary and was not shamefaced; apparently no one took offence. Something had aroused his marauding instincts of a half-grown man, quickened the progress of emotions about which, up to that night, he had done little more than talk. He himself had a look of astonishment at the liberties he was taking.

The other boys in consequence grew coarser in their speech and gestures, hoping, if not to outdo him, to check his triumph by embarrassing the girls. In their turn they looked boldly across the room at his supposed cousin from Milwaukee, perhaps thinking of revenge; but not one had the courage to sit down in the conspicuous corner.

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Rita's mother, with great complacence, had begged them to have a good time and not to break anything, and retired to her bedroom.

The games were lively but not quite amusing. A ring on a string brought the slightly scarred and stained boys' hands into contact with smaller moist hands and even among the folds of dishevelled costumes. Humiliating positions and red-faced kisses were assigned as forfeits. A girl played the piano, but not many of them knew how to dance, and these seemed unhappy to be in each other's arms under the eyes of their friends. Then chairs were placed in a row, around which they marched; the music stopped and started without warning, and they scrambled for seats; there were pushes and pinching and needless collisions. Sometimes one or two would pause by the dining-room door to stare at the pitchers of lemonade, the plates of sandwiches and cake covered with napkins;

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but Rita did not want to serve the refreshments too soon, lest the party come to an end.

One of the Indians and the girl with a bunch of violets moved chairs into Philip's corner, one on each side of him. They found nothing to say. The girl's look of languid interrogation shifted from her partner to the disguised boy and back again. The Indian pulled his fingers. Then the girl rose and darted out on the porch. Glancing back at Philip with an indefinable expression, the sturdy youth followed. Through the bay-window Philip saw a single shadow made of both their figures, and supposed it was a kiss.

The party could not go on much longer in those small warm rooms. An increasing impatience for the dark and the bushes, for long grass in which footsteps would be lost, for soft boughs lost in the sky, was revealed by everyone's glances toward the doors and windows.

Carl pursued his Irish-Turkish girl from one chair or sofa to another with boisterous

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but somber violence. Philip waited until they reached the opposite corner of the other room, and then slipped into the hall. No one was there; the door stood open and the freshness of cut grass and blossoming syringas drifted in. He wanted to go out on the porch, but did not dare, because of the sweethearts who had just left him. He sat down a little way up the stairs, took off his gloves and his half-mask, rested his overlaid woman's head in the palms of his boy's hands . . .

He was not alone many minutes. The boy in the uniform of no particular country followed him. Neither knew what to say; the soldier sat down on the same step. Philip knew him by sight—his father was a carpenter, his name was Art Sampson. He supposed he must have figured out his identity. Then Art Sampson took his hand and put one arm around him. Philip twisted about in confusion and changed his mind—obviously the soldier did not know who he

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was. He tried to get up, but one foot somehow caught in the skirt and he was afraid of tearing it. The soldier sighed with his lips pursed. Philip did not know what to do. "Give me a kiss," the other muttered. The kiss slipped off Philip's cheek into the scented strands of his wig. He got away, giving the soldier a kick, leaving him to his astonishment. The kick hurt his own foot because Lucy's slippers were so thin. He came back into the sitting room alone.

Not many of the guests were there. They had gone out by a door which opened directly on the porch. Carl was gone. Two unattractive girls on a sofa were telling secrets. Some boys were playing poker on the floor; paper flowers and streamers lay all about them, crumpled and untwisted. The remaining costumes were also torn and trodden upon. Philip stood there, miserably excited.

Out in the dark, as usual, couples mixed up with the time of night and the porches and the flowering shrubs, one girl laughing

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under a tree with a shrouded sound (a hard hand was over her mouth), someone trying to play a stringed instrument, secrets being told and being felt, no more misery in the kisses, no more self-consciousness in such games as were being played . . . Carl was there with his Irish friend.

Everyone had forgotten Philip; he might as well not have come. He could not make up his mind where to sit down. His dress hung askew; he straightened it with boyish jerks under which the corrupted silk gave way. Their hostess, Rita, dressed as a queen, was sitting loosely on a sofa; the other Indian, a slow fellow, held her hand and seemed to be studying it. She looked feverish and disappointed.

Philip decided to go home, and wondered why he had not done so before. He did not want to say good-bye or see the boy in the hall again. So he slipped into the dining room as if to look at the refreshments, thence into the kitchen, from the back porch to the

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pitch-dark alley, and down the alley to the street.

There he felt frightened for a few moments. Men might be coming home from the saloons, the billiard parlor; some of them were capable of anything; they would think the worst of a woman alone at that hour, in such clothes, and tear off the clothes if he told them who he was. He walked as fast as he could. A boy's stride went badly in Lucy's shoes. He stumbled over the dress and tore it. Now he did not mind taking it back to the sisters in bad condition. He would tell them, he thought vindictively, that he had not had a good time—they would be sorry.

The wide sky, he saw, was dappled with stars. He was angry as well as tired. Carl had played a trick on him, neglected him, deserted him. He did not know whether that would bring an end to their friendship or make it more substantial, equalize it. He

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would make another friend if this one failed . . .

Under the street lights the lawns foamed with flowering plants. From Rita's back door he had turned down a side-street to avoid passing her garden, and he did not see anybody in the others.

Perhaps if he had talked to the pseudo-soldier they would have made friends, and laughed at the fraud of the one, the error of the other. Soon he would be enough older for there to be no more disguises, nor need to be taken care of, nor harm in being neglected. He hated women's clothes; by a deliberate step he tore the ruffled skirt again.

Out of the evening's misery in retrospect faded all willingness to be unhappy. The only good time had been up in the tree at twilight, the pink satin amid the green leaves forming a world of their own, without excitement or humiliation; then being disguised as a woman had been like being a large flustered bird guarded by the branches. How

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long ago—it might have been sometime in his childhood. Never, he resolved, would he have such fairy-tale ideas again.

He had to cross the river on a little echoing foot-bridge to get to the part of town in which he lived. An odor similar to that of cucumbers rose from the water and the mud. There down below the brown currents were trickling, the green willows with gentle boughs caressing themselves. He no longer envied the caresses in Rita's garden. He was sick of the age he had been too long, the age of envy and masquerades, of petty martyrdoms which have a savor of joy, when nothing is satisfactory in solitude; and tried not to think that some of this youthfulness might be natural to himself and so permanent, for he wanted that night to mark plainly an end. . . .

There was no one on Main Street. The pool room and bowling-alleys were closed. He made up his mind to go into one of these places as soon as he could save money from the small allowance which his parents gave

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him and get someone to teach him to play. He had looked through the windows often enough to know what they were like. The air marbled the smoke, the broad green tables under the light-bulbs shaded with green glass swinging gently, the smooth cues manipulated according to complex rules, the ivories rolling, twirling, meeting, hard cheek to cheek, with a little pure click, the men in shirt-sleeves, absent-minded, vain, and skillful; and down below in the basement the alleys of glimmering wood, waxed and exquisitely jointed, stretching away under the great growling balls to the pins in perfect order, and the only negro in the town to set them up when they fell, his ugly face shining. . . . Philip smiled for the first time since he had been dressed up in these rustling torn clothes. He was too young to be strong; he might never have brutal strength or direct, effective desires; he believed that he could be skillful.

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He wished that he had a luxurious house like Carl's at the other end of the town to go home to—the odor of bath-towels and tobacco mounting the wide staircase with classic banisters; and the luxury he wished for was something serviceable and severe like the felt and the ivory and the waxed wood behind the shabby façades on Main Street. He wished that he had a rich mother like Carl's to satisfy once and for all his desire for such things as the satin clothing and soft foliage, in the maple tree after sunset; and robust, indifferent brothers, not to protect him but to be imitated by him. Instead it was to Mrs. Dewey's boarding-house that he was making his way as fast as he could.

He opened the door cautiously. The dirty stairs were lit by a gas-jet. The room in which Mrs. Dewey slept opened off the first landing. She called, "Who's that?" He did not answer, but mounted more quietly. By a creaking of the boards inside her door

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he understood that she was looking through the keyhole. She would think that one of her other boarders, the undertaker's assistant or the patent-medicine vendor, was receiving company in the night.